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ANTAR, THE ARABIAN NEGRO WARRIOR, POET AND HERO

That men of Negro blood should rise to distinction in Arabia is not at all singular. By language and ethnological conformation the people of the Arabian Peninsula belong to the great Semitic group of the human family. But the proximity of Africa to Arabia carried the slave trade at a very early period to that soil. Naturally, as a result of intermarriage, thousands of Negroes with Arabian blood soon appeared in that part of Asia. This was especially true of the midland and southern districts of the peninsula. To-day, after several centuries of such unions, there is found in southwestern Arabia, in northern and central Africa an ever-increasing colored population of vast numbers, known as Arabised Negroes. Many of these have become celebrities whose achievements form an integral part of Arabian civilization and Mohammedan culture.¹ Emerging from this group came Antar, the most conspicuous figure in Arabia, a man noble in thought, heroic in deed, an exemplar of ideals higher than those of his age and a model for posterity.

Antarah ben Shedad el Absi (Antar the Lion, the son of the Tribe of Abs), the historic Antar, was born about the middle of the sixth century of our era, and died about the year 615. Some accounts give the year 525 as the date of his birth. By Clement Huart, a distinguished Orientalist, he is described as a mulatto.² "Goddess born, however," says Reynold A. Nicholson, "he could not be called by any stretch of the imagination. His mother was a black slave."³ All authorities agree that Shedad, his father, was a man of noble blood and that his mother was an Abyssinian slave.

The manner in which they became attached to each other

¹ Palgrave, "Essays on Eastern Questions," 37 et seq.

² Huart, "A History of Arabian Literature," 13.

³ Nicholson, "Literary History of the Arabs," 114.

is interesting. As a result of tyrannical action upon the part of King Zoheir, chief of the Absians, several chieftains seceded to attack and rob other tribes and establish their own kingdom. Among these chieftains was one Shedad. In their wanderings they attacked and conquered a certain tribe, among the prisoners of which was a black woman of great beauty named Zebiba. Shedad fell in love with this woman and to obtain possession of her yielded all rights to the spoils. She then had two sons. Shedad lived in the fields with her for a time, during which she gave birth to a son. As a boy his strength was prodigious and courage unparalleled.

In his early life Antar was assigned to the lowly task of a keeper of camels. Here he followed the usual routine incident to such a task while the clan of his father roved from place to place, clashing with rivals in quest of the prizes of the chase or the spoils of war, or rested in some vale of Arabia and devoted itself to the simpler pastoral life. Following this sort of occupation, he so distinguished himself as to impress the woman whom he later married. This was Ibla, the beautiful daughter of Malek, another son of King Zoheir. She was, therefore, Antar's cousin. Antar's growth in courage, in bodily strength, sense of justice, and sympathy for the weak excited her admiration and high esteem. His love for Ibla found expression in deeds of valor and poems dedicated to her virtues, but the jealousy of chieftains and his lowly birth prevented their union. The magnanimity of Antar in the face of bitter opposition, however, and his undying love finally won him Ibla as his bride.

Favored by great strength and a leonine courage, Antar soon passed from the duties of a keeper of camels to those of a first-class fighting man. By these virtues, so highly prized by the warlike Arabs, he ingratiated himself both with his father and his tribe. Much of the life of Antar is lost to authentic history, but that part which remains shows that he followed the career of a great chieftain endowed with military qualities, poetic gifts, and a talent for leadership of extraordinary order. According to Huart, he took

part in the terrible wars of the horses arising out of the rivalry between the stallion Dahis and the mare Ghabra.⁴ Treachery alone prevented the famous courser from winning the race, and in his vengeance Qais, chief of the tribe of Abs, waged bitter war against his enemies. Antar was the rhapsodist as well as a participant in these contests. Success in war rapidly followed. His kinsmen forgot his lowly birth and former menial occupation and regarded him as the first warrior of his day. His deeds of heroism increased his prestige and after his father's death he became the protector of his tribe and the pattern of Arabic chivalry.

Meanwhile he had shown such rare poetic gifts that his fame spread beyond the circle of his clan and in due course of time he was selected as a contestant in those poetic trials that were peculiar to the Arabs in the pre-Islamic days. So successful was Antar's effort that he was acknowledged the greatest poet of his time and one of his odes was selected as one of the Mu 'Allakât, the seven suspended poems, which were judged by the assemblage of all the Arabs worthy to be written in letters of gold and hung on high in the sacred Kaabah at Mecca, as accepted models of Arabian style.⁵

⁴ Huart, "A History of Arabian Literature," 14.

⁵ These are two selections from Antar's Mu 'Allakât:

A FAIR LADY

'Twas then her beauties first enslaved my heart—
Those glittering pearls and ruby lips, whose kiss
Was sweeter far than honey to the taste.
As when the merchant opes a precious box
Of perfume, such an odor from her breath
Comes toward me, harbinger of her approach;
Or like an untouched meadow, where the rain
Hath fallen freshly on the fragrant herbs
That carpet all its pure untrodden soil:
A meadow where the fragrant rain-drops fall
Like coins of silver in the quiet pools,
And irrigate it with perpetual streams;
A meadow where the sportive insects hum,
Like listless toppers singing o'er their cups,
And ply their forelegs like a man who tries
With maimed hands to use the flint and steel.

The death of Antar is enshrouded in obscurity. Antar perished about the year 615 while fighting against the tribe of the Tai. According to one authority he had grown old and his youthful activity had forsaken him. He is said to have fallen from his horse and to have been unable to regain his feet in time. His death was a signal for peace and the end of the long-drawn hostility. In spite of the tribe's desire to avenge its hero and its bard, a compensation of 100 camels was accepted for the murder of one of its scions and the poets celebrated the close of the long struggle. Another author says the hero, stricken to death by a poison shaft sped by the hand of a treacherous and implacable foe, remounted his horse to insure the safe retreat of his tribe and died leaning on his lance. His enemies, smitten with terror by the memory of his prowess, dared not advance, till one cunning warrior devised a stratagem which startled the horse out of its marble stillness. The creature gave a

THE BATTLE

There where the horsemen rode strongest
 I rode out in front of them,
 Hurl'd forth my battle-shout and charged them;
 No man thought blame of me.
 Antar! they cried; and their lances
 Well-cords in slenderness, pressed to the breast
 Of my war-horse still as I pressed on them.
 Doggedly strove we and rode we.
 Ha! the brave stallion! Now is his breast dyed
 With blood drops, his star-front with fear of them!
 Swerved he, as pierced by the spear points.
 Then in his beautiful eyes stood the tears
 Of appealing, words inarticulate.
 If he had our man's language,
 Then had he called to me.
 If he had known our tongue's secret,
 Then had he cried to me.

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Deep through the sand drifts the horsemen
 Charged with teeth grimly set,
 Urging their war-steeds;
 I urged them spurred by my eagerness forward
 To deeds of daring, deeds of audacity.

bound and Antar's corpse, left unsupported, fell upon the ground.⁶

His fame as a literary character transcends that of the modern authors of black blood, such as Pushkin in Russia, and the elder Dumas in France. After his death the fame of Antar's deeds spread across the Arabian Peninsula and throughout the Mohammedan world. In time these deeds, like the Homeric legends, were recorded in a literary form and therein is found that Antar, the son of an Abyssinian slave, once a despised camel driver, has become the Achilles of the Arabian Iliad, a work known to this day after being a source of wonder and admiration for hundreds of years to millions of Mohammedans as the "Romance of Antar." The book, therefore, ranks among the great national classics like the "Shah-nameh" of Persia, and the "Nibelungen-Lied" of Germany. Antar was the father of knighthood. He was the champion of the weak and oppressed, the protector of the women, the impassioned lover-poet, the irresistible and magnanimous knight. "Antar" in its present form probably preceded the romances of chivalry so common in the twelfth century in Italy and France.⁷

This national classic of the Arabian world is of great length in the original, being often found in thirty or forty manuscript volumes in quarto, in seventy or eighty in octavo. Portions of it have been translated into English, German and French. English readers can consult it best in a translation from the Arabic by Terriek Hamilton in four volumes published in London in 1820. This translation, now rare, covers only a portion of the original; a new translation, suitably abridged, is much needed. The fact that its hero is of Negro blood may have chilled the ardor of English translators to meet this need.

The original book purports to have been written more than a thousand years ago—in the golden prime of the Caliph Harún-al-Rashid (786–809)—by the famous As-Asmai

⁶ Huart, "A History of Arabian Literature," 13.

⁷ Holden, "Library of the World's Best Literature," 586.

(741-830). It is in fact a later compilation probably of the twelfth century. The first Arabic edition was brought to Europe by an Austro-German diplomat and scholar—Baron von Hammer Purgstall—near the end of the eighteenth century. The manuscript was engrossed in the year 1466. The verses with which the volumes abound are in many cases undoubtedly those of Antar.

One enthusiastic critic of this romance has said: "The book in its present form has been the delight of all Arabians for many centuries. Every wild Bedouin of the desert knew much of the tale by heart and listened to its periods and to its poems with quivering interest. His more cultivated brothers of the cities possessed one or many of its volumes. Every coffee-house in Aleppo, Bagdad, or Constantinople had a narrator who, night after night, recited it to rapt audiences. The unanimous opinion of the East has always placed the romance of Antar at the summit of such literature. As one of their authors well says: "'The Thousand and One Nights' is for the amusement of women and children; 'Antar' is a book for men. From it they learn lessons of eloquence, of magnanimity, of generosity and of statecraft." Even the prophet Mohammed, well-known foe to poetry and poets, instructed his disciples to relate to their children the traditions concerning Antar, "for these will steel their hearts harder than stone."⁹

Another critic has said: "The Romance of Antar is the free expression of real Arab hero-worship. And even in the cities of the Orient today, the loungers over their cups can never weary of following the exploits of this black son of the desert who in his person unites the great virtues of his people, magnanimity and bravery, with the gift of poetic speech. Its tone is elevated; it is never trivial, even in its long and wearisome descriptions, in its ever-recurring outbursts of love. Its language suits its thought: choice and educated, and not descending—as in the 'Nights'—to the common expressions or ordinary speech. It is the Arabic

⁹ Edward S. Holden, "Library of the World's Best Literature," I, p. 587.

romance of chivalry and may not have been without influence in the spread of the romance of mediæval Europe.”¹⁰

An idea of this romance may be obtained from the following:

Years and years ago King Zoheir ruled Arabia. Now Shedad, a son, nettled under the stern sway of his sire and longed for the chase and the combat. The green plains becked, the murmuring streams sang until the heart of Shedad grew sad. When the sun rose one morn he gathered his camels and warriors and departed.

Far from the home of King Zoheir dwelt the tribe Djezila in peace but Shedad fell upon them and slew them. As beautiful as a goddess was a black woman named Zebiba who was captured. Now it came to pass that Shedad loved Zebiba and dwelt with her and her two sons in the fields. In time she bore him a son, as dark as an elephant, with eyes as black as night and a head of shaggy hair. They called him Antar.

Antar grew in strength, in courage and in mind until the chieftains disputed his possession, for his mother was a slave and Antar must tend the herds. Zoheir summoned the chieftains and Antar and when he was brought before him he marveled and threw him a piece of meat. But a dog that chanced to be in the tent was quicker than he and seized it and ran off. Rage gave Antar the fleetness of the wind. With mighty leaps he bounded after the dog. Swifter darted no eagle upon its prey than Antar pursued the rogue. With a mighty spring he caught it and seizing its jaws tore them asunder down to the beast's shoulders, and in triumph he held the meat aloft. But the King grew afraid and let Shedad depart with Antar. At ten years of age he slew a wolf that harassed his flock and later killed a slave who had beaten an old woman. Thus did the women find in him a protector and they hung upon his words and recounted his deeds and his acts of justice.

Now Shedad's brother, Malek, had a daughter named Ibla, who was as fair as the moon. The ladies were wont to drink camel's milk morning and evening when Antar had cooled it in the winds. It chanced one morning that Antar entered Ibla's tent just as her mother was combing her hair, and the beauty of her form transfixed him. A thing of loveliness fairer he had never seen, nor ringlets of darker hue grace a human head. His heart beat wildly at the birth of a great passion and the hot blood burned his dark

¹⁰ Richard Gottheil, "Library of the World's Best Literature," II, 674.

cheeks. But Ibla fled and Antar left with a light heart. For days he sang in measures sweet of Ibla's beauty and his arm burned to do deeds. The weeds of the field became the fairest of flowers; the limpid pools mirrored Ibla's face in images beautiful and pure and the zephyrs whispered of love. But Antar had dared love a princess and his father became wroth and came to the fields one day with some chiefs to punish him.

When they arrived they found Antar in combat with a lion. With a roar like thunder the beast lashed its tail and advanced. But Antar knew not fear. He stepped forward to the fray. The snarling creeping beast scratched furrows in the ground and bided the time for the spring. Then it leaped. Like a flash Antar hurled his lance and leaped aside. A gleam of light and iron met flesh as the mighty body hurtled by. Quickly he seized the shaft and held it firmly while the beast lashed furiously and growled in its death struggles, and then it lay still. But the heart of Shedad was softened and he invited Antar and the chieftains to sup with him. Long into the night recounted Shedad Antar's deeds but the dark eyes of Antar saw only Ibla and his heart yearned for the morrow and the end of the feasting.

Not far from the land of King Zoheir dwelt the tribe of Temin and Zoheir and his warriors departed to war against them. To Antar was entrusted the care and protection of the women during Zoheir's absence. Antar swore to protect them with his life and the women were not afraid. But the days are long when lords are away and the women burned for entertainment. Then it was that Semiah, the lawful wife of Shedad, called the women together and spoke of a feast on the shores of a near by lake. When the day came Ibla and her mother attended and as Antar saw her his heart leaped with joy. Just then shouts were heard and from afar appeared a cloud of dust which grew larger and filled the sky as it drew near. Out from the cloud of dust sprang the tribesmen called Cathan and with yells they seized and carried off the women.

But Antar sped up like the wind when he heard the shrieks of his beloved Ibla and saw her anguished face and frenzied struggles. Horse he had none but love and despair gave him the swiftness of a steed, the courage of a lion and the strength of the elephant. Across the plains he coursed as swiftly as the wind but the steeds were as swift as he. Clouds of dust choked him and hid him from view but double burdens on tired coursers could not continue the mad pace. Antar overtook one horseman, threw him off and slew

him. Then a cry arose among the tribesmen of Cathan to kill Antar, but Antar lusted for battle and donning the armor of the slain man, he slew warrior after warrior until the tribesmen of Cathan loosed the women and fled. Then Antar comforted the women and drove many horses home before him, among them a black charger.

When Shedad returned with Zoheir he went to visit his flocks and saw Antar upon a black horse guarding the herds. Shedad inquired whence came the horse, but Antar did not wish to betray the imprudent action of his father's wife and remained silent. Thereupon Shedad called him a robber and struck him with such violence that the blood ran. But Semiah saw the cruel act and her heart went out to Antar. She clasped him in her arms and throwing herself at her lord's feet, she raised her veil and told the story of the attack and rescue and Antar's courage. Antar's silence and magnanimity so touched Shedad that he wept. The news of Antar's feat soon reached the king, who gave him a robe of honor and rich presents.

But jealousies among the chieftains toward Antar grew and plots were made to kill him. Again and again he circumvented his foes and in triumphs showed infinite pity and mercy. Deeds of darkness but increased the mutual love between Ibla and Antar and the name of Antar was heard far into distant lands.

Now it happened that a youth of wealth and lineage sought Ibla's hand in marriage. But pride choked him and he basked in the glory of his fathers' deeds. When Antar heard of the boastful youth's suit he swore a great oath to kill him and he fell upon him. But the youth escaped. Now the chieftains saw a chance to destroy Antar's power and encompass his destruction. They appeared before Zoheir and demanded Antar's life. Then Zoheir stripped him of his high estate and favors and sent him back to the fields to attend the herds and Antar bowed his great head in shame and left. But the love he bore for Ibla was as meat to his body and refreshment to his mind and his great spirit died not.

Soon the tribe of Tex fell upon Zoheir and his warriors and sorely pressed them. The pride of Zoheir, however, was great and Antar stayed far from the battle, for his heart was heavy and he was again a tender of herds. Then the day went against Zoheir and his warriors and many fell and sadness came upon the land. And the men of Tex pressed the men of Zoheir harder and carried off the women and with them Ibla. Still Antar tended the herds

and came not. But the mighty chieftains of Zoheir came to him and begged him to cloak his wrath and do battle with them against the men of Tex. And Antar heard the men of Tex in silence and his heart gave a bound when they spoke of Ibla, but still he stayed in his tent and came not. Then the chieftains sought to move him by his great love for Ibla. Thereupon Antar's face beamed and he spoke and laid down the condition that Ibla must be given him as a wife. Shedad and Malek agreed and Antar girt himself and with the remnant of Zoheir's army went against the men of Tex. Now the strength of Antar was that of a hundred men and his courage that of a thousand and animated by his great burning passion and with the ardor of battle in his nostrils he fell upon the tribe of Tex. Redder sank never a sun than the plains blushed with the blood of men after that battle. Tears filled Ibla's eyes when she beheld Antar and in triumph he led her back to the land of King Zoheir. But the heart of Malek was false, and bitter plots were rife, and even Shedad viewed in despair the rise of a black slave. Malek demanded that Antar should give his bride a present of a thousand camels of a certain breed that could be found only in distant lands. Now Antar read his heart and saw his wicked artifice but he set out. Far from the land of King Zoheir wandered Antar, far from the wiles of Malek and jealous suitors, far from the tent of his beloved Ibla. But the heart of Antar was not cast down nor did hope die.

Now it happened that Antar entered the country of Persia where he was taken prisoner. His captors bound him upon a horse and departed for the village of their king. Tidings came of the ravages of a fierce lion and no warriors dared to give it battle. Fiercer had roamed no lion in the land of King Zoheir nor in Persia. Whole villages fled before it and herds were but as chaff. But Antar begged that he be loosed and they untied his bonds and gave him a lance and he departed to attack the lion.

Courage is half victory and the arm of Antar was skilled in the art of the lance and his heart was stout. But the strength of the lion was of the body whilst that of Antar was of the body and the mind. With a mighty throw Antar hurled the lance and it found its mark, but the lion bounded forward and Antar stood unarmed. Then with a mighty wrench he jerked a young tree from the ground and with powerful blows beat down the attack of the lion. He gave a mighty swing and cleft the beast's skull and it fell down and died, and Antar departed for the tent of the king. Then the men mar-

velled, for none dared follow to see the terrible combat nor did people believe until they saw the beast.

Then the king loaded Antar with rich gifts and honors and gave him the thousand camels which he sought, and Antar departed for the land of King Zoheir. Great was the rejoicing of Ibla when messengers brought tidings of Antar's return. Great was the surprise of Malek and the rage of the chieftains. But Shedad's heart softened and he yearned for his son and the fair Ibla gave him her hand and Antar and Ibla married and dwelt in the land of King Zoheir.

To this day the fame of Antar still persists. Rimsky-Korsakoff, a modern Russian composer, has given us in his symphony "Antar" a tone picture of this Arabian Negro's life that opens and closes with an atmospheric eastern pastorage of great beauty. It has been played during the past winter with marked success in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, at the concerts of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, that representative body of great musicians. The remarkable career of Antar and the perpetuation of his memory in history, literature and music, though removed by many centuries from the life of the American Negro of today, offers to him many thoughts for reflection.

While Arabia of the pre-Islamic days is not America of this generation nor the Semitic people of the East like the Germanic races of the West, still those human qualities that make for valor, for greatness of spirit, that reflect genius devoted to literature and social service are compelling forces in all climes and in all races. An opportunity for a free expression of them and a recognition of their potent effect in the sum total of human culture should be the mission of scholarship in all lands. Those elements of character which the Arabs of Antar's day regarded as their *beau ideal* were found not unworthy of admiration when manifested in one of Negro blood. When his poetic fancy reflected the spirit of Arab life his works were not rejected because his mother was an African slave but one of the best was placed among the immortal poems of his father's country. When his genius for warfare was shown it was given an opportunity to de-

velop and serve the cause of all who preferred valiant deeds to arguments of race. When his life was spent it was not looked upon as one of an unusual Negro rising above a sphere previously limited to his fellows of the same blood but as an epic of success crowning human effort and worthy to be embodied in the literature of Arabia as the exploits of a hero who exemplified the spirit of the people, acceptable for all time as their model for valor, poetic genius, hospitality, and magnanimity.

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